

The Psychopathology of Uneconomics

MAURICE B. LINE

THIS PAPER MAKES NO PRETENSE to be a scholarly review of the literature on uneconomic things done in, by and for libraries, and the attitudes responsible for and resulting from them. I am not an economist nor a psychologist (let alone a psychopathologist), but a librarian who spent all his working career in university libraries until a few years ago; this paper is a set of personal observations.

The subject of this paper could hardly have been chosen twenty years ago, and if it had been chosen it would hardly have been understood. The idea that libraries should pay much attention to economics is a relatively recent one. Librarians have, of course, always complained of insufficient money to buy all the books they wanted to buy, and to this complaint was frequently added demands for more staff. A big library was, almost by definition, a beautiful library — the bigger the more beautiful. What is relatively recent is the concept that libraries are systems or organizations consuming and deploying capital and recurrent resources that can be optimized — as is the discovery that not only was optimization attained, if at all, only by accident, but that some libraries actually approached “pessimization” by using their resources in almost the least effective way possible. Little in the structure of the university has given the librarian any incentive to think in economic terms. Indeed, there are some inducements not to economize. For example, if he does not spend all his budget in one fiscal year — even if in the process he knowingly wastes money — his budget for the following year may be reduced. There

Maurice B. Line is Director General, British Library Lending Division, and Professor Associate, University of Sheffield Postgraduate School of Librarianship and Information Science.

is no profit motive to inspire the librarian, and there is no paying market for his services. Moreover, many of the most costly elements of the library operations, such as storage, heating and lighting, do not have to be funded from the library budget.

The changes have come about for several reasons. Most obvious is the combination of the increasing growth of published material, with its implications for acquisition and storage costs, and increasing restrictions on funds. This is only an aggravation of a problem that has always existed, but when the problem is aggravated beyond a certain point it almost begins to constitute a new problem. At least as powerful a factor has been an unparalleled increase in demands from users, as their numbers have grown at an enormous rate and as traditional disciplines have given birth to new subdisciplines and broken their boundaries to constitute numerous interdisciplines. Increase in user demand has also been greatly stimulated by improvements in bibliographic control, both in comprehensiveness of coverage and in speed of notification.

These changes in libraries are paralleled by, and are in part the consequence of, changes in their parent institutions. Academic institutions have developed from cottage industries to large and complex organizations absorbing ever-increasing portions of the national (or state) budget. Inevitably, a more careful watch has been kept on the money they spend and how they spend it; and attempts have been made to measure the contribution they make to the economy. Universities have therefore been forced to think in economic terms, to justify their estimates in detail, to allocate their resources with great care, and to measure their outputs. Not only have they had to consider how best to use new resources, but in many cases how to allocate *reductions* in resources. Various techniques and approaches have burgeoned, such as PPBS and, most recently, zero-based budgeting, which demand that every expenditure be justified from scratch, as if it were entirely new.

These developments have affected the library, as they have every other part of the university. For librarians to say in such circumstances merely that they need more money to buy more books, more staff to serve more readers, and more capital to build new buildings to house more books and readers, is clearly not enough. The apparently fundamental truth that libraries must expand to buy the books available has been challenged by hard reality. Some librarians have still not accepted this fact, maintaining that the hard reality is temporary, while the need for growth is eternal. Other librarians, perhaps making a virtue of necessity or perhaps by a happy coincidence, have challenged the very concept of

"big is beautiful," arguing that the criterion by which libraries must be judged is not their size but their service. By this reasoning, the library is no longer a thing-in-itself but an integral element in the university, in scholarly communication, in education and in society itself; it can be understood only in relation to its context, and the main commodity in which it deals is not books but information. There has been a gradual but profound shift from the book-oriented library to the user- and information-oriented library, from the more or less self-sufficient collection to the switching center, from the storehouse of knowledge and cultural heritage to the information broker. The conventional objectives of the library have thus been challenged. It is not, of course, axiomatic that the information center is always cheaper than the conventional library; it is quite possible to save money on books and waste it in other ways.

The question of the library's objectives is vital to economic considerations, because economies cannot sensibly be discussed except with reference to objectives. To run the library as economically as possible is not a meaningful objective unless the "library" is defined, any more than economy in itself can be a principal aim; otherwise, the most economic library would be one that was closed down and its contents dispersed. Economic success or failure depends on what one is trying to achieve.

Almost all librarians have been forced by economic pressures to reexamine not only their functions, but also the methods by which they try to achieve them. Here, too, recent years have seen some fundamental questioning, striking at the roots of traditional theory and practice. In this case, librarians have not generally had to conduct their reexamination in public in order to justify their estimates; rather, they have been obliged to try to economize in order to keep within their reduced budgets, and the debate has been an internal and private one. The question "How can we reduce the costs of the present catalog on its present lines?" must have been asked by many librarians for many years. "Do you need a catalog at all, and if so, what sort?" is a much more fundamental question, which librarians have been most reluctant to answer, let alone ask. Skipping the first part of the question, they have tended to answer, "One with the fullest details, of course." This answer is not necessarily true, even if the need for a catalog is assumed and the time and convenience of use taken into account; the fullest catalog is not necessarily the one that serves readers best. However, again assuming that a catalog is needed, it is reasonable to ask: "What is the best catalog that can be provided at the least cost?" In the attempt to answer this question, a better catalog — one that serves more readers more adequately — may be designed than if no costs are

taken into account. Similar questions may be, and have been, asked about classification and subject indexing, issue systems, acquisition systems, and other routine practices and operations.

Among the various economies that might be made in a library with more or less conventional objectives are the following:

1. Cataloging is a very labor-intensive operation. Costs can be cut, perhaps by half, by the use of records from an external data base, use of lower-level staff, and shorter records.
2. Classification in most libraries is at least as costly as cataloging, and often more so. The more detailed it is, the more costly it is to use, and still greater costs are incurred when changes are introduced into the scheme. For browsing purposes, extreme detail may be more confusing than helpful, while for information retrieval, few classifications are sufficiently detailed or convenient to use.
3. Subject indexing along traditional lines is also very costly. It can be reduced by the use of keywords in titles, enhanced where absolutely necessary. The cost can be eliminated entirely if bibliographies are used to guide readers to books on specific topics, just as abstracting and indexing services are used for subject access to journal articles.
4. Book selection can absorb a great deal of staff time and effort, although it appears that many books are still selected that are never used at all. Crude selection might be just as effective and a lot cheaper.
5. Acquisition budgets, especially for journals but also for books, can in many cases be greatly reduced with only a minimal reduction in service. Since in any large library the vast majority of demand falls on a small proportion of the collection, trimming the fringes does no harm and can produce great savings in staff, processing and binding costs as well as in purchase costs.
6. Permanent retention of stock that need never have been acquired in the first place, or that served its entire purpose long ago, is expensive because of the space it occupies. Even if discarding costs are not negligible, they should be easily outweighed by space savings over a period of ten or twenty years at the longest.

Most of the above examples concern methods of providing access to books that have been acquired, but the last two represent an attack on acquisitions and disposal—a more fundamental attack, because the stock, according to the traditional concept, is the heart of the library, without which it would not be a library at all. To suggest that cataloging and classification can be simplified is bad enough; to suggest that fewer books

might be bought and more discarded is much worse. The ultimate blasphemy is to suggest that the library need not even ask for as much money as it does, either for staff, books or buildings. The largest savings can usually be made in the area of staff, since several tasks could be eliminated or simplified, or carried out by lower-level staff than at present.

The application of economics need not, of course, concern only a reduction of existing costs. The increased utilization of capital resources of stock, and of the skill and expertise of staff, is an economic good, and this can be encouraged by improved circulation practices and policies, and by opening the doors of the library more readily to outsiders. It may even be possible to earn money for the library by selling services to industrial organizations.

Money saved in one or more of the above ways can be used in various ways — if indeed the reason for saving in the first place is not a reduced budget. For example, more can be spent on services and less on processing; a wider variety of current books may be bought, cheaply processed and drastically weeded after four or five years; and so on. The question must always be what kinds of services users really need, and how best to provide them.

When the attackers are from “outside” the library — from the university or its funding bodies — they can be dismissed as ignorant barbarians, appeased as angry gods, or submitted to as irresistible conquerors. However, much of the assault in recent years has come from within the library community itself, and this has been more difficult to deal with. Wherever the attacks and pressures have come from, librarians have generally been singularly unprepared for them. In few cases have they even known what the true costs of their existing operations are. This ignorance has had some strange results. For example, gifts of books, however useless, have been welcomed as “free,” although the costs of processing books are high (indeed, considerably higher than the purchase price of most deliberately acquired books). Journals are all bound and stored permanently, when it may be far cheaper to discard some of them unbound after two or three years and rely on interlibrary loans for the occasional requirement. Numerous other examples could be given of uneconomic things done in unwitting or willful ignorance.

The reactions and responses of librarians to economic pressures may take a variety of forms, not necessarily mutually exclusive. Some of these are described below.

The simplest response is the *traditional*. This response takes the form not of an argument, but of an assertion that the library is by definition a

collection of books, as large as possible, cataloged, classified and indexed according to traditional standards. "We must be very careful before we change established practices" is a common expression of this attitude.

Allied to the traditional response is the *perfectionist* response: "Only the best is good enough; we must maintain our standards." "Best" and "standards" are undefined, but are usually assumed to mean "most detailed and elaborate." One manifestation of the perfectionist attitude is the urge toward constant improvement, whatever its cost. It is cause for some amazement that new and "improved" cataloging rules and revised classification schemes can be, and frequently are, devised and adopted without full prior consideration of the costs of implementing them.

Also related is the *cultural* response: "The library is a storehouse of culture, and to damage or erode it in any way is to damage or erode the cultural heritage." This is indeed true of national archival collections and portions of many other libraries, but not of the generality of libraries, which are funded by institutions in order to serve them here and now. Some librarians appear all too ready to sacrifice the needs of the present, which can be known and largely met, to the dead needs of the past and the unknown needs of the future.

Allied with any of the above may be *passive resistance*: "Don't do anything and it may go away; it's only a fad that will go the way of other fads." This response may be deliberate (and sometimes quite effective), or it may represent the paralysis of the rabbit confronted by the snake. It may be expressed openly as the *mañana* approach: "Make my library economic, o University, but not yet."

The above attitudes do not enable libraries to avoid the hard facts of economics, but they can easily result in their sub-optimizing — doing the same thing, only a little less expensively: buying fewer rare books, spending a little less on rebinding, and so on. More commonly, these attitudes are combined with some of those below, or those below are used as "fronts" for those above.

The *political* response appeals to prestige and status: "To reduce our acquisitions would gradually make our library smaller than X or Y, and we might even fall behind Z." The fact that the most prestigious universities tend to have the biggest libraries is adduced in support of this argument, although the most obvious reason for this fact is that the most prestigious universities usually have the most money to spend on libraries, as on other things. (They also tend to have the oldest buildings, to enhance their university status.)

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The *psychological* or *pseudo-altruistic* response is also quite popular: "Users won't stand for it/won't adjust to it/shouldn't be expected to accept it"; "You can't recruit staff to work in a library with reduced acquisitions/a withdrawal policy/simplified processing"; "Libraries must be thought of in terms of individual users whose needs are all different — optimization is concerned only with groups and averages." The obvious answer to this is that a library that tries to satisfy everyone is in danger of satisfying no one; and that a library whose basic procedures are geared to the greatest good of the greatest number can still aim to serve individual needs as exceptions.

Another group of responses apparently concedes something to the economic approach, and can carry some superficial and temporary conviction. The first is the *mini-economic* response: "But I *am* economizing — I saved \$1000 last year by using a different printer for bookplates." The implication is that the librarian has looked at all details of his operations to see where economies might be made.

More impressive is the *pseudo-economic*, expressed in "cooperation" and "resource-sharing." On investigation, most exercises in resource-sharing appear to save little or no money, but cost quite a lot to operate. Very often, *more* money is spent on making more extensive resources available to a group of libraries, though the use of these resources, and the costs of satisfying the occasional needs through other channels, are rarely compared with the cost of this additional provision. (In the United Kingdom, the argument that resource-sharing saves money has now been virtually abandoned, and it is admitted that more money is needed for it, though little or no evidence is offered that the need for it is there in the first place.)

The *marginal-economic* approach argues that while some aspects of libraries can and should be costed, these are only minor, and the most important things cannot be measured, let alone costed. "What is the value of information?" is a popular question with this school, as are assertions about the value of browsing, which is usually confused with serendipity. (Incidentally, serendipity would be best served by the random arrangement of books on the shelves, which would avoid classification and thus save a great deal of money.) It can easily be shown that some things cannot be measured, and the implication is that the economic approach should therefore be used only in marginal ways, and then very carefully.

The *false economy* riposte is also common: "It costs too much to change procedures; discarding costs more money than new buildings; interlibrary borrowing costs more than acquisition," and so on. If these

statements are not made as mere assertions, they are supported by one-sided and shortsighted costings. One can make procedural change, discarding or interlibrary borrowing cost whatever one likes, within limits, just as other costs, such as those for storage (including the cost of half-empty buildings), can be ignored or minimized. This is not to say, of course, that change should not be costed before it is decided upon, that discarding is cost-free or that it should be applied to any but very little-used stock, or that it is not more economical to buy books of which more than minimal use can be expected. The full economic facts are needed in all cases.

The *overkill* response is less often encountered, but not unknown: "There is no point in altering the present system because the whole pattern of primary communication will change in the foreseeable future"; or "We have a very big automation program ahead which will change all our procedures anyway" — whether for the better or worse, or at what cost, is rarely stated. This is in fact a subtle variant, albeit starting from different premises, of the *mañana* approach. It can carry some conviction because the librarian appears to be forward-looking; indeed, his eyes are looking so far forward that he is in danger of falling into an economic pit a few yards in front of him.

Most of these responses have something to be said for them, and a reasonable, or at least plausible, case can often be made in their support. However, they can also be rationalizations for attitudes based on deep and often primitive emotions. Of these, insecurity is probably the main one, leading to fear of change, acquisitiveness, reluctance to shed possessions, and clinging to the past. Also, many librarians are not ready to accept that their past training — in history, literature or philosophy — is an irrelevant anachronism. To recognize oneself as a dodo on the way to extinction cannot be a happy experience.

Emotions such as these are so universal that it may seem hard to refer to them as pathological. They are pathological only if their existence and strength are not recognized and if they intrude into decisions that should be made on rational grounds. The personal emotions of librarians have no place in running an efficient library service. However, the personal emotions, and likely reactions, of users certainly must be taken into account. Moreover, a wise library director would not attempt to ride roughshod over the primitive emotions of his own staff: they too have to be persuaded. A rational librarian has, as part of the process of reaching a rational decision and implementing it, to consider the psychopathology of others as one essential fact, as real as library procedures and costs. In

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other words, he should be an amateur psychologist as well as an amateur economist.

So far I have considered the responses of those who oppose or resist change, arguing that many of them have a psychopathological basis. However, it is equally true that there is a psychopathology of excessive change. The conservative traditionalist is, or was, a more common type in libraries than the restless "change-for-change's-sake" librarian, but the latter has gained much ground in recent years. Automation programs in the 1960s provided many striking examples of bandwagon jumping. Some experiments undoubtedly had to be conducted in order to find out how best to use the power of the computer, and in the process some mistakes were bound to be made. Deliberate experimentation is, however, something different from the exceedingly incautious programs embarked upon in some libraries — programs on which much money was wasted. There must be numerous other, less spectacular, examples of forward plans that were never properly costed but were entered into as facts of faith. There is some danger that massive withdrawal programs will fall into this category, though the obstacles to such programs are so great, and withdrawal decisions involve so many people besides the librarian, that overly hasty action is less likely than with automation.

A different pathological type is the *hypereconomist*. This is the librarian who tries to reduce everything to numbers and costs, who considers that what cannot be measured either does not exist, or should not exist, or is not worth bothering about if it does exist. The term "cost effectiveness" is ever on his lips, and value judgments are alien to his conceptual world. He may appear at first to be at an opposite extreme to the overcautious traditionalist concerned with the perfectibility of cataloging, but in fact he is a mutation of the same species. Like the professional cataloger, he is an obsessional, insecure individual who seeks security, not in catalog entries but in numbers. The one catalogs and classifies experience; the other counts and costs it. Both feel safer because they have reduced the infinite range and variety of knowledge and life to something visible, filable or measurable. The hypereconomist is merely a perfectionist who has learned a bit of economics, or perhaps a second-rate economist who has strayed into libraries and seen easy pickings there. There may in fact be a place for these people, for a time at least. If it had not been for obsessional counters like Sir Francis Galton, the science of statistics would have developed more slowly (though it may still be doubted whether Galton's efforts to measure the protuberance of Hottentot women's bottoms or the efficacy of prayer constituted great advances

in knowledge). Likewise, a few obsessional hypereconomists may be a useful counterbalance to the uneconomists of the past.

Discussion to this point has made the uneconomic or hypereconomic librarian the object of scrutiny. However, libraries do not exist without users (in spite of the efforts of some librarians), and the total ecology and economy of libraries must take users into account.

The attitudes of faculty toward an economic approach to libraries are likely to be ambivalent. On the one hand, the library is competing with departments for limited institutional funds, and it is in the faculty's interest to resist increases, or even to seek reductions, in the library's budget. On the other hand, one of the main resources of research — in the humanities and many of the social sciences, *the* main resource — is the book collection, and every department wants as good a collection as possible. The department may react to this clash of interests with confusion, or by arguing different ways on different occasions, or by pressing for more library funds for books in their subjects and for fewer in other subjects. Attitudes may be partly determined by the nature of the discipline. A historian is less likely to take, or accept as valid, the economic approach than an economist, a technologist or even a physicist; his values will be different, and he will be less likely to view resource allocation in a systematic or scientific way.

However, faculty reactions are not generally predictable. What can usually be predicted is that if the librarian cuts resources or services in particular subjects or areas, there will be an angry response, even if the cuts are the direct result of budgetary reductions approved by the faculty itself. Similarly, if the librarian reallocates resources from stock to service — sacrificing, say, some acquisitions in order to pay for better information services in the form of access to computer data bases — there may well be an outcry. Even if it can be shown that the service aids faculty in its research and teaching more than stock, faculty still tend to prefer stock; and if they have the choice of sacrificing primary literature or secondary services such as indexing and abstracting journals, they will sacrifice the latter. If a suggestion is made that some stock could be disposed of or relegated to low-use storage, there are protests from faculty, even when it can be shown that none of the present faculty has used any of the stock in question, or that much of it has never been used by anyone.

The desire to maintain the stock in a department's own subject is understandable enough; the unwillingness to accept services instead of stock, or to accept relocation of unused material is not rational, and comes at least partly within the realm of psychopathology. The possessive instinct

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familiar to nearly everyone is one obvious explanation. No one likes to throw away household goods acquired years ago or inherited, even though they have never been used; after all, "it may become useful some time."

Apart from possessiveness about stock, faculty do not exhibit much psychopathology. They may want or expect the library to do uneconomic things, but this rarely becomes a major issue. Also, faculty can use libraries in uneconomic ways unwittingly. For example, they may ask for some documents on interlibrary loan that they would not request if they were aware of the true cost of borrowing. Indeed, faculty use of libraries takes place in almost total ignorance of the actual and relative costs of different activities, so that uneconomic behavior is inevitable. Education in the economic facts of libraries rather than psychological treatment is indicated for faculty; and this is the responsibility of the librarian.

The attitude of students is less easy to identify or categorize because it varies so much, both within and between generations (student generations are very short), and because students are generally not much concerned with the economic operation of the university. The only time they want the library to economize is when they take up some particular cause, such as free contraception for themselves or Stetsons for poor Peruvian Indians, which they consider to be a more important use of funds.

More often, students want more books on their subjects, more copies of books, more space in which to work and, in general, more of everything. There may be some conflict with faculty, since with a limited budget it may not be possible to provide enough textbooks for all students as well as serve faculty research needs adequately.

One quite common student attitude is a reaction against hypereconomics, not on traditional and conservative grounds but on antiscientific grounds. The spirit, emotions and senses are everything; reason, particularly as exemplified in science, economics and statistics, is nothing. Indeed, the whole library may be seen as a storehouse of the knowledge and reason they detest, and acts of arson and other forms of destruction have not been unknown. These are truly pathological.

The university administrator must not be ignored. It is from or through him that pressures to economize come, and he is much more likely to be concerned with economy than effectiveness, let alone cultural values. He may, however, be open to conviction that the library is a valuable cultural asset to the university, and hence worth defending. He may within himself contain the conflict between various warring elements in the university at large — the admirer of size and prestige versus the cost-con-

scious administrator, the preserver of culture versus the servant of modern science and technology.

With all these existing conflicting attitudes and values, the ensuing debate is bound to bring forth some prime examples of psychopathology. The net result may be the worst of all possible economic worlds, but is more likely to be a sad compromise between hard economic facts, entrenched attitudes, the needs of the majority, and the wishes of the powerful. There is all the more need for a librarian to have appropriate knowledge and apply it carefully and rationally. The forces of unreason have much more chance of victory when a rational case is not argued fully or carefully presented.

Library directors may presently be pulled in two different directions: toward the humanistic and cultural approach, in which many of them were bred and which can seem antipathetic to an economic approach; and toward a half-baked economic approach which can be destructive as well as superficial. The solution surely lies in better education and a more comprehensive vision. Library education must not merely teach a few economic techniques, but inculcate as deeply as possible an economic and systematic approach. This is all the more vital because libraries, as non-profit organizations, offer very little economic motivation — no extra money is to be earned by economizing. Library administrators, at whatever level, spend most of their time in problem-solving — small day-to-day problems as they arise, and much larger, long-term problems (which really must be solved first if wise day-to-day decisions are to be made). The automatic approach to any problem should be to analyze it, identify possible solutions, and compare the various options for costs and effectiveness. Librarians do not all need to be economists or systems analysts, but the economic and systematic attitude toward the library should be second nature.

This alone is not enough, and a comprehensive vision is needed that embraces cultural and humanistic values as well as economics and systems analysis. Far from being in fundamental conflict, the two should be seen as complementary. The library needs to be run economically and effectively *in order* to provide the best possible service with the resources available. If it is not run economically and effectively, a few may receive a good service at the expense of the many. Nor is designing the basic system to satisfy the most common needs speedily and efficiently in conflict with serving special and individual needs; these can in fact be served better, if the main system runs smoothly and there is spare capacity to provide individual service where it is needed. In place of the commercial objective

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of the maximization of profit, the librarian's objective should be the maximization of service.

Economics must be seen as the servant of the library user, and of the objectives of the university, including cultural and even traditional objectives. To question radically the means by which values are served is not necessarily to question the values themselves. The implication of this is that some economics certainly must be taught to librarians but only in a much wider context. And librarians need to be constantly reminded that they are supposed to be serving users, not books, shelves, catalogs or buildings. Finally, none of these skills is of much practical use unless the library director develops political skills: he can learn from Machiavelli as well as Panizzi.

ACRONYMS

ARL — Association of Research Libraries
CONTU — National Commission on New Technological Uses of Copyrighted Works
FY — Fiscal Year
GNP — Gross National Product
ILL — Interlibrary Loan
ILLINET — Illinois Library Network
MIT — Massachusetts Institute of Technology
PPBS — Program Planning and Budgeting System